New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1954

Volume XV, Number 13 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of October 25, 1954

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"Peter Pan"

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NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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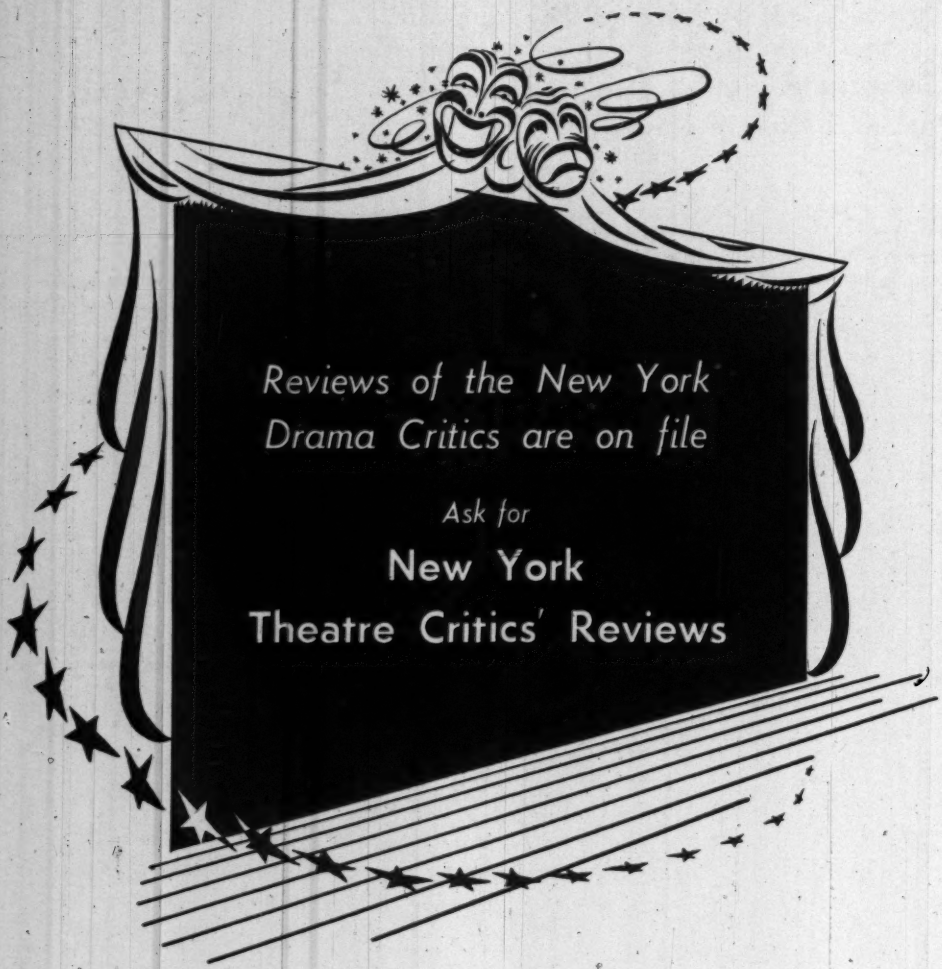
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Theatre Critics' Reviews

"Peter Pan"

The New York Times

October 21, 1954

The Theatre: A New 'Peter Pan'

Mary Martin Bows in Musical Version

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IF Mary Martin is satisfied, so are the folks out front. The musical version of "Peter Pan," which opened at the Winter Garden Wednesday evening, is a vastly amusing show.

Barrie wrote the libretto. But a lot of the exuberance of Texas has stolen into the legend now. For Miss Martin, looking trim and happy, is the liveliest Peter Pan in the record book. She has more appetite for flying and swinging than any of her more demure predecessors, and she performs as actor, dancer and singer with skill and enjoyment. Peter Pan may have been a proper Victorian originally. He is a healthy, fun-loving, American now.

As the bloodthirsty Captain Hook, Cyril Ritchard gives a superb performance in the grand manner, with just a touch of burlesque. Among the other stars of the production, put Jerome Robbins' name high on the list. Mr. Robbins began as a choreographer. Without taking leave of that profession, he has directed this phantasmagoria with inventiveness and delight. The adventures of Peter Pan are marvelously enlivened in Never Never Land by any number of comic ballets for children, Indians and pirates —rushing and winning in style, though never alien to the innocent spirit of Barrie. Mr. Robbins has done a wonderful job.

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There is room for some arguments about this full-gauged show. By the time the third act comes round, it begins to look over produced. Peter Larkin's scenery is magical, as are Motley's costumes and all the other impedimenta of a big carnival. But a Hollywood-like lust for production for production's sake makes things look ponderous toward the end.

Nor has the music much taste. The songs and the lyrics have been contributed by many hands, and some of them are suitable. The opening nursery fugue, called "Tender Shepherd," is a lovely piece that promises a charming evening. There is a highly comic tango for the pirates, and a sweet-tempered waltz for Liza (who is Mary Martin's daughter) in the second act. But most of the music sounds as though it had come out of Tin Pan Alley tune factories. It lacks distinction and has no audible fondness for Barrie.

Although the taste in showmanship and in music is common, the taste in performers is impeccable. Kathy Nolan's round-faced beaming Wendy is perfect—girlish without sentimentality. As the mother of the Darling children, Margalo Gillmore gives a beautiful performance. Sondra Lee, as Tiger Lily, the Indian maid, is uproarious. She dances and acts a sort of gutter Indian with a city accent that is mocking and comical.

•

The orphan boys are well cast, particularly in the case of one begoggled little shaver with a tooth missing who teeters gravely through the dances. Among the pirates is Joe E. Marks, a short man who looks constantly worried and more like a homebody than any pirate should. Norman Shelly's maternal-minded dog, Don Lurio's disdainful kangaroo, Richard Wyatt's scholarly lion and Joan Tewkesbury's gossipy ostrich are very cheerful company.

Altogether it is a bountiful, good-natured show with a lot of disarming child's play, and Miss Martin flying through the scenery. "Peter Pan" with a Texas accent is fun.

"PETER PAN"

Musical version of the play by Sir James M. Barrie; lyrics by Carolyn Leigh; music by Mark Charlap; additional music by Jule Styne; additional lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green; incidental music by Trude Rittman and Elmer Bernstein; production and dances staged by Jerome Robbins; settings by Peter Larkin; costumes by Motley; Edwin Lester's production presented by Richard Halliday at the Winter Garden Theatre, October 20, 1954. The cast:

Wendy	Kathy Nolan
John	Robert Harrington
Liza	Heller Halliday
Michael	Joseph Stafford
Nana	Norman Shelly
Mrs. Darling	Margalo Gillmore
Mr. Darling	Cyril Ritchard
Peter Pan	Mary Martin
Lion	Richard Wyatt
Kangaroo	Don Lurio
Ostrich	Joan Tewkesbury
Slightly	David Bean
Tootles	Ian Tucker
Curly	Stanley Stenner
Nibs	Paris Theodore
Crocodile	Norman Shelly
1st Twin	Alan Sutherland
2d Twin	Darryl Duran
Captain Hook	Cyril Ritchard
Smee	Joe E. Marks
Tiger Lily	Sondra Lee
Cecco	Robert Tucker
Noodles	Frank Lindsay
Jukes	William Burke
Starkey	Robert Vanselow
Mullins	James White
Wendy Grown-Up	Sallie Brophy
Jane	Kathy Nolan

Daily Mirror

October 21, 1954

Mary Martin Irresistible As Pixie 'Peter Pan'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

A few months ago Edwin Lester conceived the idea of turning a classic into a delightful entertainment. The classic was, of course, James M. Barrie's Peter Pan." Lester called on Carolyn Leigh, Mark Charlap, Jule Styne, Betty Comden and Adolph Green to equip the perennial favorite with sprightly lyrics and music.

THEN HE WAS fortunate enough to land a great star, Mary Martin, for the title role and a great farceur, Cyril Ritchard, to double as the nice Mr. Darling and the villainous Captain Hook. So the captivating fun-fest rang up record runs in Los Angeles and San Francisco. It could still be playing to standees on the Coast, had not Miss Martin, born in Texas and adopted by New York, wanted to give her following here a treat.

Richard Halliday, Miss Martin's husband, brought "Peter Pan" to the Winter Garden Wednesday evening for an engagement limited to 16 weeks. We understand that tickets for that period are already gone. We suspect that unforunates without the precious ducats will be hounding Mary's favorite fellow to keep the festive frolic here indefinitely.

Lester has done with "Peter Pan" what British managers do every Christmas with ageless stories. He has produced the Barrie gem in the manner and spirit of a holiday pantomime. The liberties he has taken with the script may shock a few traditionalists, but will enchant everyone else. With respect for the original, he has hoked it to the hilt, eliminating much of the whimsy and coyness that have disturbed worldlings for many years.

•

AS FOR MISS MARTIN, she is nothing less than magnificient. She sings, dances and acts with such charm as to be utterly irrestible. She is perfect as the boy who escapes school and growing up, via flight to Never-Never Land. There is warmth, understanding and vitality in this magical performance. She brings an excitement to the stage that has been lacking too long.

Ritchard, one of the truly fine stylists of our era, is quite marvelous in his roles. Sondra Lee, a small blonde bundle of dynamite, completely won the hearts of the first-nighters as the Indian Princess, Tiger Lily. And Miss Martin's young daughter, Heller Halliday, did likewise as Liza, the servant girl. A duet in the third act between mother Mary and fledgling Heller put lumps in the throats of sentimentalists like us.

The cast is large and gifted. Even the bit parts are played beautifully. We only regret that lack of space and an onrushing deadline prevent our paying individual tribute to all the participants. So here's a bow from the waist to the entire company.

•

PETER LARKIN and Motley (Elizabeth Montgomery) have designed settings and costumes that catch the mood of fantasy gorgeously. They should be up for some award this season, when the annual voting starts. Richard Rodda has devised flying effects that are out of this world. They had the customers gasping and cheering.

Jerome Robbins merits a rousing salute for his direction. This young Ballet Theatre alumnus, turned choreographer and stager, has shown remarkable inventiveness in blowing the dust off a venerable work, to reveal it as a superlative evening of theatre.

Hail to Mary Martin in "Peter Pan!" The season's first triumph. The young in heart of all ages will love it, and they'll adore Mary.

DAILY NEWS

October 21, 1954

'Peter Pan' Still Captivating in A Colorful, Gay Musical Version

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The magic of James Barrie's "Peter Pan" is as great as ever it was, and the musical version of this most endearing of all theatrical fantasies is a captivating show. Last evening, at the Winter Garden, Mary Martin's splendid Peter and Cyril Ritchard's fabulous Captain Hook won still another audience among the many thousands of audiences which have yielded so happily to this little story of the boy who would not grow up.

Some may quibble, asking what is the sense or purpose in turning a gem of a play into a big song-and-dance production. With such crosspatches, who may hark back to the sainted Miss Adams and will surely recall Jean Arthur's fine production of a few years ago, I shall not agree. With or without music, "Peter Pan" is "Peter Pan."

A Pleasant Ending

Almost all the story is there at the Winter Garden—the wonderful story of the motherless boys, the Indians and the possessive little Tinker Bell—and there is an epilogue which Barrie wrote in his book about Peter and Wendy but not in the play. In this epilogue it is promised that Peter will always return to teach new generations of children to fly and whisk them away to Never Never Land, where once again they will do battle with the ferocious Hook and his crew of ruffians. It should be this way.

Miss Martin is all I had hoped she might be—slim, eager, cocky . . . the spirit of youth itself. It is a bewitching moment when she flies in the great tall windows of the Darling home, and when she puts on a demonstration of flying the while she sings a song, one's heart is with her.

Ritchard is by all odds the best and most wonderful Captain Hook I have ever seen or imagined—an imposing big fellow who betrays himself as a sham pirate by mincing when he should stride and giggling when he should snarl. This is a completely comic impersonation and only a very fine actor could accomplish it.

The music and lyrics, by Carolyn Leigh, Mark Charlap, Julie Styne, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, are quite pleasant, including "I've Got to Crow," "Mysterious Lady," a nonsensical Indian number called "Ugg-a-Wugg" and an absurd waltz for Captain Hook. The songs will do, but I don't imagine they are so memorably right for a fantasy as was the score for "The Wizard of Oz," by Harold, Arlen and Yip Harburg. Asking such perfection would be asking too much.

The settings by Peter Larkin—particularly the pirate ship—are grand and gay, and so are the Motley costumes. Jerome Robbins has staged the production with relish and insight.

And there are some fine people on the stage with Martin and Ritchard, among them being Margalo Gillmore as Mrs. Darling, Kathy Nolan as a darling Wendy and a fascinating little trick named Sondra Lee as an Indian princess. Joe E. Marks is on hand, blessings on him, to portray Smee, and Norman Shelly is again inside the costumes of the dog and the crocodile.

Miss Martin's daughter, Heller Halliday, makes a pleasing debut as Liza, a maidservant, and has a nice little song-and-dance turn with her mother, who somehow manages to look at least as young as Heller.

Journal American

October 21, 1954

New Version Sheer Delight

Mary Martin Tops All of Her Enchanted Evenings

By JOHN McCLAIN

MARY MARTIN has made quite a career of enchanted evenings lately, but she topped them all last night in a new musical version of "Peter Pan," presented by Edwin Lester at the Winter Garden.

In my compendium this is an extraordinarily ingenious wedding of J. M. Barrie's timeless fairy tale with a pleasant and workable score; and it has the added charm of never taking itself seriously for a moment.

From start to finish it is a rollicking spoof: the animals are the silliest in the world (the kangaroo's pouch contains her make-up kit and closes with a snap fastener); the Indians are mixed-up and frantic, yet strangely lovable; the Pirates gnash their teeth and scream for blood, and are constantly outwitted; even their leader, Captain Hook, feels called upon to sing a tender roundelay attesting to the fact that he is "the creepiest creep in the world."

Mood Recaptured

There may have been more profound productions of "Peter Pan," and there will be those who say that some of the lyric beauty of Barrie's words are lost in this modern slapbang version. But it is impossible to deny that the spirit remains intact, and that the interpolated songs and numbers, though something less than immortal, have captured the quality and mood of the original to a remarkable degree.

From the moment she flies through the window, center stage rear, and lands almost in the footlights, it is Mary Martin's evening. She has ample opportunity to sing a vast number of songs in that characteristic lilt, to clown to her heart's content, to dance and prattle and, especially, to fly around the stage higher and faster than all her predecessors.

Cyril Ritchard is brilliantly cast in the dual role of Mr. Darling, the father of the sprouts Peter lures to Neverland, and Captain Hook, head of the pirate band. There has never been a more effete and ludicrous villian, who makes most of his entrances and exits in a swaying sedan chair.

Other notable contributions are offered by Kathy Nolan, as Wendy; Margalo Gillmore as Mrs. Darling; all the little boys and girls; Sandra Lee as Tiger Lily, and, particularly Heller Halliday, Miss Martin's daughter. They sing a reprise together in the last act which is charming.

Jerome Robbins directed the proceedings and it seemed to me he deserved enormous credit for preserving the atmosphere of buffoonery throughout, for integrating a series of small ballets and tableaux into the story without losing the trend, and generally maintaining the pace at a merry clip.

Peter Larkin gave noble assistance with a series of delightful settings

The music is credited to Mark Charlap and Jule Styne, with lyrics by Carolyn Leigh, Betty Comden and Adolph Green. It is too confusing to choose the stand-outs in this line-up, but certainly "I've Got To Crow," "Neverland" and "I Won't Grow Up" are memorable.

Miss Martin is a most beguiling Peter, and I believe this is about as bright and enjoyable a production of the classic as we are apt to see in our time.

New York Post

October 21, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

'Peter Pan' as a Musical Comedy

They have made a gay, lavish and colorful musical extravaganza out of Sir James M. Barrie's "Peter Pan," with some score of songs, lively dancing, a handsome physical production, and Mary Martin and Cyril Ritchard in their most infectious mood. At the Winter Garden last night, where it opened before the season's fanciest audience, it gave every sign of being a resounding hit, and, as one who feels that the antic whimsies of Barrie can do with a lot of enlivening, I thought it was a considerable improvement on the famous fantasy of childhood.

It can hardly be said that the music or the production in general bother much about adhering to the Barrie-esque mood, and, while it didn't seem to me that the assorted talents of Mark Charlap and Jule Styne in the score and Carolyn Leigh, Betty Comden and Adolph Green in the lyrics worked out quite as brightly as might have been expected, my own conviction is that the note of Broadway musical comedy was a pleasant antidote to some of the saccharinity of the original text. There wasn't too much time left for the Barrie archness.

The Stars

Although Miss Martin is very decidedly the star of the proceedings and Mr. Ritchard was at the top of his comic form, they had to share their honors last night with the inventor of the flying wire. "Peter Pan," with its aerial children, is highly dependent on that wire, and it was never more happily used than in the current production. Being a girl with a steady head and apparently at the peak of her physical fitness, Miss Martin darted through the air with not only the greatest of ease but also with a breath-taking speed fascinating to watch.

No one brings a warmer or more infectious gaiety to the theater than Miss Martin, and she has never used her talent for imparting her high spirits and the good time she is obviously having to an audience with greater skill. She passes over the more cloying moments of the famous old fantasy without difficulties, and her entire performance is completely captivating. And that whimsical and timorous old pirate, Captain Hook, is played with such delightful relish by Mr. Ritchard that he becomes a far funnier figure than he has seemed to me in many years.

The Story

Even though much time is taken out for song and dance, don't worry about any of the story being left out. The tale of Peter and Wendy, the pirates, the Indians and the Never-Never Land is all there, though perhaps slightly abbreviated, which is all right with me. In addition, the current "Peter Pan" has all sorts of features to offer, from a friendly kangaroo to a Lost Child with spectacles, who looks disturbingly like Truman Capote. But the chief virtue of the production is its air of high spirits that keeps away the curse of excessive sentimentality.

There are a number of helpful performances in the smaller roles. Kathy Nolan is a fresh and charming Wendy. Miss Martin's attractive daughter, Heller Halliday, is brightly engaging as the maid who flies off with the children, and Margalo Gillmore gives Mrs. Darling the proper warmth. Among the men, Norman Shelley is equally engaging as Nana, the dog, and the clock-carrying crocodile, while Joe E. Marks repeats the success he had in the previous production as the motherly pirate, Smee. I'm certainly not one to object to the Broadway touch that has gone into "Peter Pan."

New York Herald Tribune

October 21, 1954

THEATER

'Peter Pan'

By WALTER F. KERR

Something to Crow About

I DON'T know what all the fuss is about. I always knew Mary Martin could fly. She's always bounced along as though the earth were made of inner-spring mattresses, and that piping, rollicking voice of hers would carry any one aloft, wires or no wires, any old time. Be that as it may, from the moment that Miss Martin zooms in out of the night through gigantic nursery windows—barely bothering to stop at the footlights—until the moment when she bests the scurrilous Captain Hook in a sword-fight by scooping right over his scoundrelly head, Miss Martin and her musical-comedy version of "Peter Pan" are sky-high with joy.

• • •

The flying, before we get past it, is nothing short of miraculous. For the first time in my theatergoing experience, it's been designed rather than limited to a couple of quick exits—in effect, it's been choreographed by director Jerome Robbins. Result: it's not so much a nervous stunt as a rapturous lyrical experience, and you're going to be popeyed with happy disbelief at the first-act curtain: Peter brushing away the heavens at hurricane force while Wendy and family bobble gently behind him, with moon and stars slipping swiftly away beneath their dangling feet. It's the way "Peter Pan" always should have been, and wasn't.

• • •

And the flying, after all, is only the half of it. Miss Martin is charming as she abstractedly rocks a rocking-horse in the Darling nursery, buoyant as she skips about a forest with a paint can full of green paint, rowdy and raucous as she leads the stubborn Lost Boys in a rebellious chant called "I Won't Grow Up." With her shock of cropped blonde hair, a dagger at her belt, and her man-in-the-moon-smile cracking her face in two, she is domestic nectar, no chaser required.

• • •

Cyril Ritchard is on hand and hook to swagger through the Neverland with long black curls, a nest of red feathers, and a monstrous leer. This particular Captain Hook carries his own orchestra with him—the drum suitably decorated with skull and crossbones—and Mr. Ritchard is a greedy, mincing, scowling delight as he fingers a flute with his good right hook, dances a tango as he thinks bloody thoughts, or slides slowly down a fire-pole with a vial of poison clenched fiercely in his teeth.

To add to the enchantment, there is an enticing little dance done by Heller Halliday—Miss Martin's daughter—in company with three stately trees and a very tall kangaroo. There is a winsome Wendy in Kathy Nolan, a handsome Mrs. Darling in Margalo Gillmore, and a splendid blood-red pirate ship designed by Peter Larkin.

I don't think the score is all that Sir James M. Barrie's indestructible fantasy deserves. Some of it has an impish swing to it, some of it is pleasantly fragile. Mark Charlap and Carolyn Leigh do nicely by "I've Got to Crow," "I'm Flying," and some evil fandangoes for Captain Hook. Jule Styne, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green—who have been rushed in as a kind of second-team to supply additional tunes—come up with lilting melody in "Wendy" and a giddily macabre waltz for "Mrs. Hook's baby boy." There is, however, a tinny and conventional strain that seeps in through the orchestra fairly frequently, there is a really massive amount of merely utility music, and you do sometimes suspect that the producers are robbing Peter to pay Pan.

• • •

But there is always the brightly crayoned, picture-book wonderland to go back to. In fact, one of the things I liked best about this particular "Peter Pan" is the fact that every one—and especially the special-effects man—takes his wonder-working seriously. Most productions cheat a bit, passing over the nonsensical magic hastily and concealing what can't quite be managed. Not here. Tinker Bell not only hides in a jug, she rolls it around. Peter's recaptured shadow dances with him, a giant on the wall. Trees unfold in full view, arrows zoom accurately through the bright green forest, a door that has just been painted on a house opens immediately, Captain Hook's arm stretches snakily for miles.

Disney isn't in the running in this amiable, elastic nightmare. The Winter Garden's "Peter Pan" may not be the definitive "Peter Pan": it has its longish, padded stretches, its loose excursions into nonessential dance, its share of not much better than serviceable songs. But I doubt that you'll ever see one that does as many tricks, and does them with such innocent, happy, bubbling good humor.